



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Finding the Love in Paul*

### *“Scripture as Liberation Poetry”*

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
May 10, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Galatians 4:21-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*I ask you, you who strive to be subject to the Law—do you understand what the Law asks of you? For scripture says that Abraham had two children—one by Hagar, who was a slave, and the other by Sarah, who was free-born. The child of the slave had been begotten in the course of nature, but the child of the free woman was the fruit of the promise. All this is clearly an allegory: the two women stand for the two Covenants. One is from Mt. Sinai, and she gave birth to children in slavery: this is Hagar. Hagar represents Mt. Sinai in Arabia—which corresponds to the present Jerusalem, which is in slavery like Hagar’s children. But the Jerusalem on high is freeborn, and it’s she who is our mother.*

*That is why scripture says, “Rejoice, you who are infertile, who has borne no children; break into song, you stranger to the pains of childbirth! For there are more born of the forsaken one than born of the wedded wife!” Now you, sisters and brothers, are children of the promise, like Rebecca and Isaac. At that time, the child born because of the urge of the flesh persecuted the child born through the urge of the Spirit. It’s the same way now. For scripture says, “Drive away the slave woman and her child, for the child born of the slave woman will not share in the inheritance with the free woman’s child.” Therefore, my sisters and brothers, we are children not of a slave, but of a mother who is free.*

## Sermon

Well, I’m sad to announce my 15 minutes of fame are up. *[laughter]*

The Cornyn campaign wanted to get at Talarico and apparently, he’s so squeaky clean, they realized there was a lot more to work with, with me. *[laughter]*

So, I don’t understand the MAGA movement. I don’t understand how people can look at themselves in the mirror. I mean, this is not Republican. Cornyn took the first half of a sentence

that I did and published that. What saved me was people went online and put the other half of the sentence on there.

We've got to do that for everybody who's under assault. While people were getting their feelings hurt about the Bible Belt being confused with the Confederacy, they were taking away voting rights.

And I don't think it's cruel or mean to describe what's happening in the MAGA movement as fascistic. Because it's describing the movement itself. You're not calling individuals that. But a fascist is one who focuses on power in one person, right?

You're focusing all the power— one person. You don't have like the whole system of democracy with balance of power. You have one person that everything is concentrated in. Check. Hyper-nationalism. Check. Focus on the military. Check. Cleansing the internal population ethnically.

And then going out and either invading or intruding on other countries saying you need more room, more space. I think people don't realize where the violence is coming from.

And so, when you look at Paul, as we've been trying to see, not all the writings that are attributed to Paul were written by the same person. But Paul didn't like bullying, and I kind of relate to that. And he felt that there were a lot of religious bullies at his time who were moving in on this beginning community and trying to make them feel bad.

He was trying to balance the Jewish population, who looked down on the Gentiles, the pagans, and the pagans, who looked down on the Jewish people. So it's sort of conservative/liberal, and Paul was trying to find principles that could take in both sides of that.

We live in a time when religion is being used to bully so many people. Putting the Ten Commandments in schools is textbook what Paul was trying to keep from happening. And we will see this in the text today. But this, this is the quote from our, one of our fine Texas politicians, Paxton:

*I will always fight for students' fundamental right to pray in our schools and work to ensure that Texas kids are able to learn from the Ten Commandments daily.*

And I remember I used to like study all of the posters on the wall. Didn't you? I mean, if they had something that said “Brush your teeth” on the wall, didn't you go straight and brush your teeth?

*Texas school districts must comply with Texas law by displaying the Ten Commandments and taking a school board vote regarding the implementation of prayer time in schools. I will not stop defending our students' religious freedom and the moral foundation of our nation.*

Does that include progressive Christians? Do pro-choice Christians have religious liberty? No, not in MAGA land. We don't count as real Christians.

And there are constant lies being told about our Muslim neighbors that Christians need to stand up. We need to ask people when they say that there's Sharia Law being imposed, *"Where? Name the place and define what Sharia Law is."*

The question I would like for you to, to sort of meditate on... It's more important than the sermon actually. And that is asking yourself what aspects of religion in your life have freed you and what have, have bound you? What have enslaved you and what have helped, helped you find your own voice? It's probably a mixed bag.

Paul is going to say that you cannot have a religion of rules that will lead to the kind of love that Jesus is calling us to. He says if you submit to the law, which is again, that's like the Ten Commandments, then Christ died in vain for you. If you could save yourself with works, then Jesus didn't have to die.

Now obviously he's being psychological there. There's something very suspect now with the whole atonement argument. He was clearly talking to religions that had rituals that made people feel safe, and they weren't working anymore. So he's trying to have Christianity fulfill it. So if they, if they sacrificed animals, they're trying to say Jesus's sacrifice covers that.

We cannot see and hear the gospel that Jesus taught, many times, because we've been taught to look through the eyes of authority and to think the gospel comes from the powerful. Directed to the weak to keep them in control. That is not the gospel that we're talking about.

There are two sides to the cross. There's the Roman side of the cross that keeps the bad people in line, and then there's a side of the cross that Jesus was on. To be a Christian does not mean to impose our way on other people. It means to be willing to suffer if necessary to bring love and truth into our world.

Paul starts off with a very interesting sentence. He says, *"Those of you who want to be under the law, do you know what the law is doing to you? Have you really looked at it?"* And most people haven't.

If you've been raised in the Church, you've been told that truth is the words that you recite. It's the creeds. And goodness is the rituals or the morals that somebody's teaching you. But that makes it alien to your own life. You have to discover the truth and the goodness within yourself.

And that doesn't work if you think this is all about Jesus, and miraculous things that happened to Jesus, and for Jesus. Jesus is trying to help us experience these miracles in our lives *now*. And I think Paul is trying to do that too.

So, Paul says something very interesting. He puts the Ten Commandments back in the story of the Exodus. Remember that the Ten Commandments begin with the prologue that's left off of the posters that are being stuck down children's throats. Where God says, *"I'm the one who led you from slavery."*

And then the list goes on. It's not rules to be obeyed; it's the principles that will keep people free. And this is completely lost in this religion of domination where Jesus the King replaces Caesar, but they're both dictators.

That's not what Jesus was doing. Jesus was renouncing any kind of dictatorship. He was trying to bring our strength out in us.

He says that there were two people... And it's really hard because when you bring up these passages, uh, there were parts that Paul did not understand. And that's when you call somebody a slave, you dehumanize them. Hagar wasn't a slave; she was being enslaved. And the person that was enslaving her was Abraham, the hero of the story.

So, we in American history have to go back to each of these stories and realize that slavery was not written in the cosmos. It was a crime that was committed by the founders of this nation.

And poverty is an extension of that. When you believe that people don't have a right to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, just because they're human, it's the slaver mindset.

Paul is going to lift up mothers, which is really good timing for me, uh, for Mother's Day. Two mothers. One of the poverties of modern Christianity is by making God male, you lose this kind of imagery. Because part of the sacred imagery is of being birthed.

The goddess is essential to understand our sacred source. We're born out of it. If you make the sacred masculine, then you're made like an object, and you can question whether God loves you or not.

But if you're being birthed by this creative principle of the universe, then every second you have is an act of love, an act of creativity. So that's the one doubt you don't need to have. That you're an offspring, a child of whatever this creative source is. And it gives us the opportunity to worship the sacred not as power, but as Love, as nurture.

When we worship the sacred as power, then we wind up with hierarchies, religious hierarchies. Paul wants to destroy those, not attack the people, but you don't need a boss. Religion can be helpful as a kind of nest to get started, but if you don't get to fly at the end of the story, then it's become a prison.

So, Paul wants us to be able to graduate. He says the law was given like a babysitter until we are able to find our own truth.

And he tells a story from the history books of the Jewish scripture and then says, "And this is surely an allegory." Now think about that. He's quoting a story from the history, Sarah and Hagar. Then says this is, this is an example; this is a symbol.

Paul was a Jewish mystic, and the highest level of understanding was allegorical. If your religion is not allegorical, if it's literal, it will come between you and life itself.

It may be very uncomfortable to think of religions being mythological. But if your religion isn't mythological, your life will probably be mythological. Where you'll be told to believe in things that you can't even *test*.

You can't know if Jesus was born of a virgin. You weren't there. But is there something miraculous about your birth? You can find that out. You can't go back and see if Jesus got up from the grave. But resurrection may be a central factor in your life, of a life that renews, that goes on.

If your religion is not symbolic, then your life may feel like mythology. And Jesus may seem real, but you don't seem real. That's not what Jesus is trying to do. Crossan, one of my favorite quotes, I've quoted it before, but I'm getting old, so I can...

He said,

*My point again is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.* [light laughter]

I don't know if you ever heard of Saint Jim Morrison. [laughter] Remember, they named the Doors after *The Doors of Perception*... He said,

*If my poetry aims to achieve anything, it's to deliver people from the limited ways in which they see and feel.*

Now, what if you looked at the Bible like that? What if instead of thinking, *this is something I've got to believe in whether I have the facts or not*. To say, this is mystics' attempts through the ages to help you see more clearly, to feel more deeply, and expand your world till it's larger, to share the experience that they had had.

And that experience isn't magical. It's what you feel when you look at the stars. It's what happens when you look in a newborn baby's face. You realize this thing is a lot bigger and a lot deeper. One of the purposes of religion is to keep us in touch with the mystical.

So then Paul gives a very weird point, but I think it's very important. He says,

*Rejoice, you who are infertile, who has borne no children. Break into song, you stranger to the pains of childbirth, for there are more born to the forsaken than are born of the wedded wife.*

A constant theme in mystical Judaism is the miracle can happen to anybody. So one of the punchlines of the virgin birth story at Christmas is Mary may be very young, but she's worthy to bear the sacred.

In the story of Sarah, she's past the age of birthing, and yet the miracle happens through her. Now, maybe there were magic tricks, but I prefer to think that the mystical is available to us in

our ordinary experiences, and that no one is disqualified. No one is too young, too old, too sordid, too confused to give this birth.

And again, if we think in maternal terms, there's something that we're born out of. It may be a being, it may be a cosmic principle, but there's a creativity that brings us into being. And that creativity is the central fact of our lives. When we build our lives around that creative principle, our lives feel like heaven. If we don't, they feel hollow.

Today is Mother's Day. What I've always loved about Mother's Day... And is it Heather Cox Richardson? Am I saying that right? Yes. She did an article on Mother's Day, and it's always good to remember that Mother's Day started as an anti-war protest.

We can be birthers of the sacred, even if it makes everybody else uncomfortable around us. She sent out a word... The woman who started it, which is, um, Julia Ward Howe, she wanted women to step out of the war machine.

The Church was once a place where we were called out of violence. And it wasn't just the country of origin. When you say, "America First," you have renounced the Ten Commandments because the first thing is nothing ahead of God.

The second is don't make images of this stuff, and that's what they're doing with these plaques that they're putting everywhere. Plus, they're voting for people who violate every one of the commandments. So to realize you're not saved magically by putting these things on the wall. We're supposed to embody them.

And again, they're not things that we obey so that we can be good slaves. They're reminders of what sets us free. So she wrote to the mothers, and I think we guys can hear this as well:

*Arise, women, say firmly, we will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies. Our husbands shall not come to us reeking with carnage for caresses and applause.*

*Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy, and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.*

Christianity is worthless if it stops at the border. This is a call out of war, out of profiteering, out of capitalism. Out of addiction. Not because we're bad, but because we are noble, and we all have a calling, and that requires us to get free. And one of the things we have to get free of is religion.

And so Paul is giving us a religion that's there when we need it, but it doesn't imprison us when we discover a new truth. Paul is trying to say that if God is like a mother, then God would rejoice not when we're obedient, but when we blossom completely, when we're fully alive.

So, we live in a time of bullies. This doesn't have to define who we are. And I would say the opposite of that. That at a time like this, being gentle, being truthful, being humble is the light this world needs.

Because this whole MAGA movement will implode. It may seem invincible, but they will turn on each other like vipers. If you are part of that movement, realize that he will betray you like he's betrayed everyone else. And you will deserve it because you went along with it, because he betrayed your enemies.

You were born to be noble. You were born to be a bearer of the sacred. Paul is calling us back to that noble calling. Set aside everything that imprisons you, everything that limits your mind, and your heart, and your strength.

Set aside all literalism, all legalism, and realize that whatever our sacred source is, it isn't asking us to be humble slaves. It is calling us to be complete offspring of the sacred.

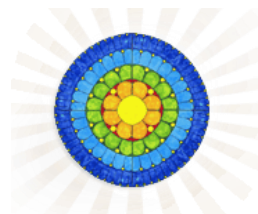
I invite you now to your own reflection on these words.

## Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

You have been invited to a path of liberation. May you let go of all that binds you and embrace that which sets you free to love. Beloved, may the sacred be born through you this day and every day. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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